

Newsletter of the Malta Field Office



RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN



BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT, MALTA FIELD OFFICE

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July 2007

Letter from the Assistant Field Manager

Dear Public Land User:

The scoping period for the Malta Resource Management Plan (RMP) is complete. We would like to thank everyone for the quality of public involvement to date. There was great dialogue about issues and opportunities the BLM will be facing for the next 15-20 years. We received 32 scoping letters and emails and met with many of you at the open houses. We understand that many people are waiting to comment later in the process when they can react to something. Comments and involvement early in the process inform us of issues important to the public and, by allowing us to focus on those issues, help us to complete the process more efficiently.

So where do we go from here?

Helping us frame the future management of public lands as Cooperating Agencies are County Commissioners from Valley, Phillips, and Blaine counties; the Region 6 Manager from Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks; and representatives from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Reclamation, and Bureau of Indian Affairs. These folks sit at the table with us and help craft the RMP. We have initiated formal government-to-government discussions with the various tribes that have ties to the area. The Central Montana Resource Advisory Council will also be involved with the plan.

We will complete the Analysis of the Management Situation (AMS) by late summer. The AMS assesses the existing management situation and discusses opportunities. Following completion of the AMS, the BLM, with help from the cooperators, will start developing a number of planning alternatives for the environmental impact statement (EIS). Each alternative represents an alternate means of managing the various resources within the Malta Field Office (MaFO). A "No Action" alternative will also be developed that reflects continuation of current management practices.

Workshops are being planned for early winter to provide you with an opportunity to help us develop conceptual alternatives for the RMP. These events will be announced on our website as well as through future newsletters and press releases. You can also contact our office if you would like more information on any of these events.

We continue to welcome and encourage public involvement as we prepare the RMP. We look forward to seeing you at future events and hearing your opinions as they relate to the planning area. Please let us know if you have suggestions for articles in the third newsletter so we can continue to keep you informed about our progress.

Rich Adams
Assistant Field Manager
Malta Field Office

Scoping Open Houses

Thank you to those who participated in the Malta RMP Open House Scoping Meetings held during October 2006 in Big Sandy, Billings, Browning, Chester, Chinook, Glasgow, Great Falls, Harlem, Havre, Hays/Lodge Pole, Helena, Malta, Opheim, Rocky Boy Agency, Shelby, Turner, Whitewater and Zortman. All told 185 people attended the open houses. Attendees had the opportunity to learn more about the planning process and speak with various members of the planning team. Accordingly, the planning team had the opportunity to gain valuable input from members of the public about their issues and concerns regarding the Malta RMP. If you were unable to attend the open houses, the information provided at the meetings has been posted on the Malta RMP website under "Public Meetings/Open House Scoping Meeting Materials" (www.mt.blm.gov/mafo/rmp) or give us a call to request information. Please let us know if you have any suggestions for locations of future meetings for the Malta RMP.

BLM Mission:

IT IS THE MISSION OF THE BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT TO SUSTAIN THE HEALTH, DIVERSITY AND PRODUCTIVITY OF THE PUBLIC LANDS FOR THE USE AND ENJOYMENT OF PRESENT AND FUTURE GENERATIONS.

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SUMMARY OF SCOPING COMMENTS



BLM exchanging ideas and concerns with our interested public during the scoping open houses.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IS A VITAL COMPONENT OF THE FEDERAL LAND POLICY AND MANAGEMENT ACT OF 1976 AND THE NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT, VESTING THE PUBLIC IN THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS AND ALLOWING FOR FULL ENVIRONMENTAL DISCLOSURE.

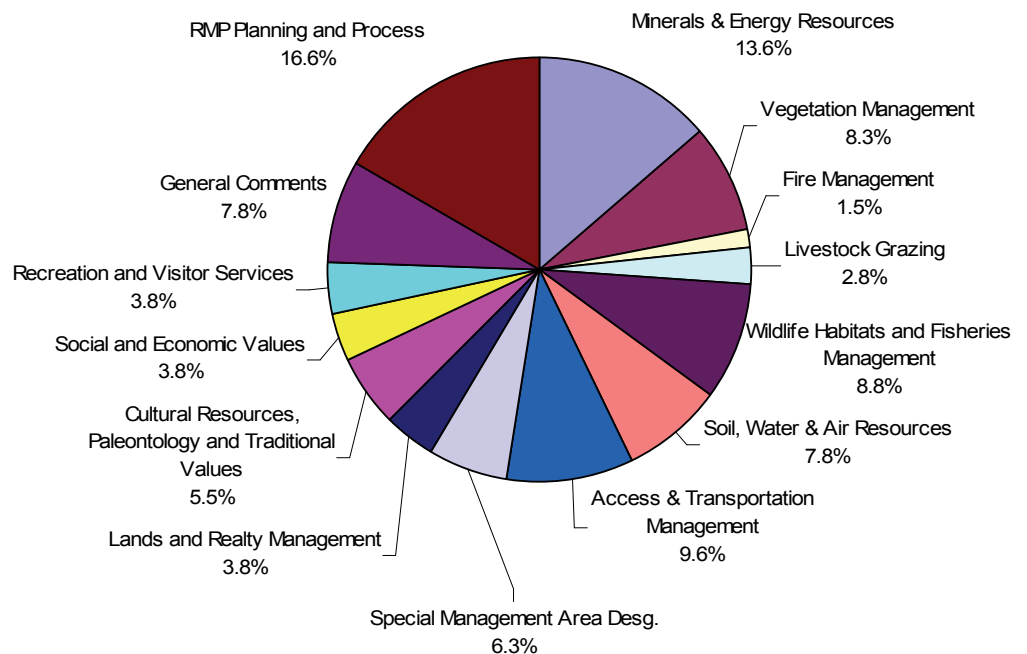
The RMP planning team would like to thank everyone who submitted scoping comments for the Malta RMP. To date, we have received 32 scoping letters, emails and faxes. Of those, 18 comments were from individuals, while 14 were from organizations, businesses, or other federal, state, or local agencies. Ninety-two percent of these comment letters came from Montana, and the remaining eight percent came from participants in other states across the nation. Among the letters from Montana, 67 percent were from communities outside the planning area. Scoping letters varied tremendously in length and content. Some letters contained one or two issues, while others raised a multitude of issues. Once we received a letter, we classified each comment within the letter was classified by major topic area to aid in

analysis. Approximately 80 percent of comments concerned resources or resource uses. The following chart shows the distribution of comments by topic. We received 397 comments and issues during the scoping period. We sorted comments into 14 topical categories: Access and Transportation Management; Cultural Resources, Paleontological Resources, and Traditional Values; Fire Management; General Comments; Lands and Realty Management; Livestock Grazing; Minerals and Energy Resources; Recreation and Visitor Services; Social and Economic Values; Soil, Water, and Air Resources (including Water and Air Quality); Special Management Designations (including Wilderness); Vegetation (including Upland and Riparian Management, Noxious Weeds and Forestry); and Wildlife Habitats and Fisheries Management

(including Special Status Species).

Comment evaluation resulted in the majority of comments falling into the following planning issues: Access and Transportation Management, Ecosystem Management, Energy Development and other Commercial Uses, Land Ownership Adjustments, Recreation Visitor Services and Off Highway Vehicles (OHV), and Special Management Designations. In addition to identifying what issues and management actions BLM should consider, many scoping letters also provided additional background information on the resources and resource uses of the Malta Field Office. This information will be considered and used by the RMP planning team as it develops the Draft RMP/EIS in the coming months.

Proportions of Individual Comments per Topical Theme



Listening to our interested public affords new opportunities for creativity and innovation in developing new land use management strategies.

Featured Planning Issue Category Energy Development and Other Commercial Uses— Livestock Grazing

BJ Rhodes,
Rangeland Management Specialist

Livestock grazing is not only a major resource use across much of the HiLine, but is also a major contributor to local economies and local governmental infrastructure.

In this article we'll discuss livestock grazing as a resource use of public lands, provide some background on current grazing management on public lands, and offer some thoughts on changes and concerns that may be addressed in this planning effort.

One of the most often-encountered concerns is how much current grazing management might be changed as a result of this planning process. The short answer is probably little, for the following reasons.

Beginning with the Missouri River Breaks and the Prairie Potholes Vegetation Allocation Environmental Impact Statements, the BLM formally recognized livestock grazing as an appropriate resource use of the public lands administered by the Malta Field Office. These two documents furthermore established forage allocation and use levels by allotment. These were subsequently reaffirmed by decisions made in the Judith-Valley-Phillips (1992) and West HiLine (1988) RMPs.

In 1998, the BLM shifted to watershed level planning to implement the Standards for Rangeland Health and Guidelines for Livestock Grazing Management that had recently been codified. To date, some 26 watershed plans across the HiLine are at or near completion. Through this interdisciplinary adaptive management process, allotments are assessed, and modifications to grazing management are made as needed on an individual allotment basis.

Therefore, the topics of livestock grazing as an appropriate resource use and current forage allocation levels by-and-

large will not be addressed. Both have been well-established and reaffirmed time and again through the planning process in documents dating back to the late 1970s. The watershed planning process and implementation of rangeland health standards and livestock grazing guidelines have proven to be a flexible and effective means of managing grazing resources.

The second most common concern involves range improvements such as stock water development or pasture renovation. Range improvements and water developments are often mistakenly viewed solely as a means to improve livestock production. By regulatory definition they are meant to, "improve the condition of rangeland ecosystems to benefit livestock, wild horses and burros, and fish and wildlife." What benefits the rangeland resource will, in turn, benefit both current and future livestock production, the idea being that a balanced ecosystem is a sustainable ecosystem.

Technological advances are continually producing new and often better ways to address resource management. For example, we now know that livestock prefer and will perform better when provided with water from a tank rather than a dugout. This has the added benefit of improving wildlife habitat by reducing livestock impacts to streamside vegetation and water quality. Incorporating the current state of knowledge into range improvements will certainly be promoted during the formulation of this RMP.

A number of issues have arisen concerning the future of grazing management for which no clear management direction is provided elsewhere. Most of these stem from current trends toward absentee ownership of ranching properties and conversion to nontraditional uses such as domestic bison grazing or the use of grazing allotments primarily as private recreational preserves. These are complex issues that will require insightful

planning to adequately address.

One long-recognized but neglected issue concerns a trend within the livestock industry toward an ever-increasing animal body size while stocking rates have traditionally remained constant. Over time, this has had the effect of increasing actual stocking rates because forage consumption is a function of animal body size. Although by current regulatory definition and for billing purposes an Animal Unit Month would remain unchanged, it would be of benefit to have some consistent guidance by which animal size could be used in setting stocking rates, especially in cases where rangeland health is in question.

It is not anticipated that many absolutes pertaining to grazing management will appear in the draft or final versions of the Malta Resource Management Plan. Absolutes are counterproductive to adaptive management approaches, quite often becoming outdated with time and technological advancement. Ultimately, we recognize the regulatory objective of grazing management is to "promote healthy sustainable rangeland ecosystems...and to provide for the sustainability of the western livestock industry and communities that are dependent upon productive, healthy public rangeland."



How should future increases in body size in relation to stocking rates be considered in this planning process?



Water developments improve the condition of rangeland ecosystems to benefit livestock and fish and wildlife.

What's Next?

Alternatives Development

The BLM, in cooperation with the Bureau of Reclamation; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; Bureau of Indian Affairs; Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks; Blaine County; Phillips County and Valley County are moving forward and developing a number of reasonable planning alternatives for the EIS. Each alternative will represent an alternate means of managing the various resources within the Malta FO. A "No Action" alternative will also be developed that reflects continuation of current management practices.

Presentations on the Malta RMP

Malta Field Office staff are available to speak to organizations about the Malta RMP. Contact the BLM through any of the means listed below to schedule a presentation.

Comments on the Malta RMP

Your comments and feedback on the Malta RMP are welcome anytime. Do you have suggestions for future meeting locations? Do you have feedback on the information presented in the newsletter? If so, contact BLM through any means listed below.

Freedom of Information Act Considerations:

Before including your address, phone number, e-mail address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment – including your personal identifying information – may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold your personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.



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We're on the Web!

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PLANNING TIMELINE

SUMMER 2007—WINTER 2008	ALTERNATIVES FORMULATION
WINTER 2008	PRELIMINARY ALTERNATIVES OPEN HOUSE WORKSHOPS
WINTER—SUMMER 2008	DRAFTING RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN
SUMMER—FALL 2008	NOTICE OF AVAILABILITY IN FEDERAL REGISTER
SUMMER—FALL 2008	DRAFT RMP/EIS PUBLIC REVIEW AND COMMENT PERIOD
FALL 2008—SUMMER 2009	FINALIZING RMP/EIS
FALL 2009—SPRING 2010	RECORD OF DECISION

(Note, the planning timeline is subject to change. Please check our web site to follow our progress in this planning effort.)